

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Intergroup bias among Addis Ababa University students

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**The purpose of this study was to explore intergroup bias among students in Addis Ababa University Main Campus. Data were collected through unobtrusive measures. Graffiti ascribed by students in toilet rooms, library “tension box” desks, reading tables, building walls and books were collected, categorized into themes and narrated qualitatively. Religion based bias was reflected through the graffiti. The bias often targeted Orthodox Christianity and protestant religious sects. The clash also seems between these religious sects. In addition, political based intergroup bias appeared between supporters and opponents of Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democrat Front, the current ruling party. Some words and phrases unfairly degrade Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democrat Front while others also unfairly promote this party. Most importantly, the findings revealed strained relations among different ethnic groups. The graffiti mainly depicted biased favors and degradation toward Amhara, Oromo and Tigrie ethnic groups. Ethnic based bias was prominently reflected as compared to political and religion based biases.**

**Key words:** Intergroup bias, university students, graffiti.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ethiopians are heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity, language, socio-cultural and economic aspects. This diversity is typically observed universities. Because universities are like “mini” Ethiopia in which students came from almost all parts of the country to attend their education. So, one can find almost all ethnic groups when he or she visits one of the universities in Ethiopia.

In Ethiopia, the number of higher institutions has increased from time to time. The number of students attending higher learning has also been also increased. All higher learning institutions are supposed to be a center of excellence academic, research and community services. But, quality of education has become questioned.

Addis Ababa University is the oldest and the largest higher institution in Ethiopia. Students who are attending tertiary level of education in Addis Ababa University came from different regions, ethnicity, linguistic and cultural

backgrounds. Most students live within in the university's compound in dormitories.

In a university setting where thousands of students live together, the formation of groups is expected. Even, Bar-Tal and Teichman (2005) argue that human beings are born into a group. Group membership is one of the most important human characteristics. People organize themselves into groups and most of their behavior is performed within a group framework. Individuals consider themselves as group members and perceive others according to their group membership (Bar-Tal and Teichman, 2005). Similarly, Myers (2010) stated that an individual does not belong to just one group rather to multiple groups based on nationality, religion, recreational pursuits, occupations, and so forth.

Therefore, needless to say, university environments expose students to diversity of experiences. They have the opportunity to exchange experiences, culture,

knowledge, and skills. Besides, university environments enable students to form groups based on very wide range of alternative such as life styles, religious beliefs, political ideology and gender, to mention but few.

Proponents of social identity theory argue that people categorize themselves into various groups, big, small or large. Once groups are formed, the actual difference among members in the same group tends to be minimized even in the presence of differences while capitalizing differences with the out-groups. Such a tendency leads to distorted perceptions, attitudes and evaluations of both in-group and out-group members (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Adherents of subjective uncertainty reduction theory claim that people have interest to reduce uncertainty in their life. To reduce their subjective uncertainty, they identify with a certain group that provides “normative” prescriptions of behavior. Put in other words, uncertainty motivates in-group identification. After a person identifies with a group, he /she is likely to show intergroup bias (Hogg and Terry, 2000).

According to this social dominance theory, ideologies in a society encourage intergroup hierarchies. Individuals who have high social dominance orientation of ideologies have a desire to promote intergroup hierarchies and dominance of their own group. For instance, men have strong social dominance orientation than their women counterparts. In order to achieve in-group dominance, people engage in behaviors of intergroup bias (Hewstone et al., 2002).

According to Bar-Tel and Tiechman (2005), most social activities take place in groups. They state that we are born in a group. Similarly, Ashmore et al. (2001) explained that living in a group is an imperative feature of humans which serves as a survival method. Moreover, Tajfel cited in Ariyanto et al. (2011) stated the natural tendency of people to categorize self and others into various social groups. In this process, they make a distinction between their own group and out-groups. So, identification to a certain social identity is formed as a result of categorization process (Tajfel cited in Ariyanto et al., 2011).

Intergroup relations are often competitive. Attitudinal and behavioral biases (favoring one's own group and over the others' group) most likely occur in competitive conditions. When competitive relationship between members of groups prevails, attraction within members of in-group increases while opposition towards out-group members increases. This leads to solidity of in-group and hostility towards out-group members which often ends up with intergroup bias (Brewer, 1978).

Likewise, some researchers (Admas, 2006; Hailemariam, 2008; Dumessa and Godesso, 2013) found various groups and the relations among students in higher institutions were not promising. In this regard, Admas (2006), Hailemariam (2008), Dumessa and Godesso (2013) found similar findings at Dilla College of Teachers Education, Addis Ababa University and Jimma

University respectively. The studies of these researchers revealed unfavorable attitudes towards out-group members of students. Contrary to this, Semela (2012) found relatively positive attitude toward out-groups among Hawasa University students.

The commonality of all the above studies is that they gave due attention to the outcome of intergroup relations-conflict. Nevertheless, none of these studies focuses on the processes involved in intergroup relations among diverse group of students. Besides, these studies gave much emphasis to ethnic-based conflict, ignoring other basis of conflict. The present study, on the other hand, attempts to explore various basis of bias reflected in the process of intergroup relations among students in the Main Campus of Addis Ababa University.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Design

This study follows qualitative research design. It specifically used unobtrusive method of qualitative research.

### Participants

Since the study employed unobtrusive method, the researcher did not directly collect data from participants. Rather, the researcher collected data from the graffiti ascribed by students in different places and materials within the Campus.

### INSTRUMENT

Initially, the author thought of collecting data using interview and Focus Group Discussion before the regular students left the campus for summer vacation. Due to absence of these students, the data collection techniques were changed to unobtrusive strategy. Of course, though students went out for summer vacation, what they reflected in the form of unobtrusive data remains in the campus. Unobtrusive techniques are also useful data collection strategies to study sensitive topics like this one (intergroup bias).

### Data collection procedures

Field notes were collected from graffiti displayed on different equipment and places such as toilet rooms, library tension box desks (desks which are made for private use in which a student hides him or herself from others), classrooms, building walls and books. The researcher used photo camera to capture the graffiti. More than three hundred statements, words, and phrases were video-taped and ascribed. In due course of time, some of the graffiti have become eroded and difficult to take photograph. So, the researcher wrote such graffiti on a note book.

### Data analysis and interpretation

After collecting field notes, coding operation was carried out. Similar contents which reflect intergroup biases were categorized into ethnic, political, religion, department and sex based-biases. After categorizing data into patterns or themes, meanings were created and narrated. Finally, discussion was made between the present

study findings and the previous ones.

## RESULTS

They graffiti ascribed by students witness immature relations among different groups of students in the Main Campus of Addis Ababa University. The campus seems a battle for ethnic, political and religion-based intergroup biases through words. This is paradox to motto of the country which says "unity in diversity".

Students demonstrated in-group favoritism to their own ethnicity, religion and political affiliation in toilet rooms, classroom walls, and tension box desks. They gave color and flavor to their own ethnicity, religion and political party. Appreciating a group to whom one belongs may be normal but it becomes a problem when there is unnecessarily exaggeration. On the other hand, they reflected out-group derogation, bigotry, hostility, and bias towards others religion, political and ethnic group members.

Ethnic based intergroup bias was most prominent vis-a-vis- religion and political based biases. Almost all the graffiti depicted in and out group bias toward the three ethnic groups (the Oromo, Amhara, and Tigrie). This may be due to ethnic based federalism which the present ruling party in Ethiopia has been exercising since 1991. There is, for example, sentiment of considering the Amhara belongs to the royal family and governor of the country. Similarly, another statement says "Amhara is the only source of Ethiopian civilization." Therefore, these graffiti reflected both in-group favoritism and out-group derogation towards the Amhara ethnic group

In addition, biases were observed among different religion sects. The biases targeted on Orthodox Christianity and protestant religions, specifically on the role of Jesus Christ, Saint Mary and Angels in getting the blessing of God. Ethiopians give great value to their religion which directs most of their activities in their lives. As a result, competitions arise among followers of different religious sects. The Orthodox Christian followers consider protestant religion as foreign as if Orthodox was not imported from abroad. Surprisingly, there were graffiti which show a tendency to associate Orthodox Christianity with the Amhara people per se as if a religion is limited to a particular ethnic group. For example, one writing says "The Amhara converted others to orthodox Christianity through force". As history tells us, protestant, orthodox, muslim and other religions came to Ethiopia from abroad.

Moreover, politica-based intergroup bias was reflected in the writings. The biases seem between two groups (pro- Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democrat Front and anti- Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democrat Front). The graffiti demonstrated hostility on one hand and favoritism on the other hand to this party.

Overall, students reflected their views, biases, stereotypes and attitudes without fear of intimidation in "safe rooms" such as toilet rooms, classrooms and so on. They vent out their wishes, feelings and thoughts though graffiti.

## DISCUSSION

Most of the graffiti displayed on lecture halls, tension box desks, books, toilet rooms, and classrooms revealed political, ethnic and religious matters. Students forwarded their in-group and out group biases. They wrote words, statement, phrases and even pictures to express their hostility, stereotype and prejudice toward out group members and to disclose their unreasonable favor to a group whom they belong.

When we see ethnic based biases, the graffiti clearly demonstrated strained relations among different ethnic groups. There were words, statement, phrases and pictures that demonstrate the superiority of Amhara, groups on one hand and inferiority on the other hand. Those statements which claim the superiority of the Amhara were likely written by Amhara students and those statements which degraded the Amhara identity were most likely written by other students who have developed bias and wrong perception. The same holds true when it comes to Tigrie and Oromo groups. Many graffiti demoted the Oromo while others unfairly promoted this group. The Tigrie group was also unjustifiably prized and degraded through the graffiti. These findings are consistent with previous research findings. For instance, According to Hailemariam (2008), large number of students in Addis Ababa university were fixated with abusive and stereotypical words toward the Amhara, Oromo and Tigrie ethnic groups. Likewise, Jimma University students experienced ethnic-based mistrust, tension and conflicts (Dumessa and Godesso, 2013). Admas (2006) also found ethnic tension, violence, and conflict among different ethnic groups in Dilla College of Teachers Education.

Coming to religion based biases, students reflected their favor to their own religion but failed to recognize others' religion. The clash seems between Orthodox Christian and Protestant followers. The argument laid on the right religion which leads to join heaven. There were graffiti which preached Orthodox Christianity as the only way to get God's blessing and the role of St. Mary and other Angles to join heaven. Other graffiti, on the other hand, accused Orthodox Church for backwardness of Ethiopia, let alone accessing to heaven. The Protestants' religion was also targets to favoritism as well as derogation. The graffiti indicated abusive and biased attitudes that undervalue protestant religion. Similarly, Mekonnen and Endawoke (2007) found disagreements over religious issues among Bahir Dar University students. However, a positive relation was found among religious groups of students in Hawasa University (Semela, 2012). This difference could occur due to administration quality in treating students so as to develop tolerance.

The other topic of intergroup bias was politics. The graffiti clearly indicated two wings having extreme positions. These are pro Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democrat Front wing and anti- Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democrat Front wing. Both wings often reflected unfair attitude towards EPRDF. Some graffiti claim

Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democrat Front as ideal party while others argue that Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democrat Front as a harsh and oppressive party. Similarly, indication of political- based bias was found in Jimma University. For instance, Dumessa and Godesso (2013) found that Tigrie students behaved politically superior and heroically reacted to Oromo students which caused conflicts.

The above findings are in line with social identity theory which states that group members capitalize differences with the out-groups and favor in groups. This results in distorted perceptions, attitudes and evaluations of both in-group and out-group members (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

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